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ABSTRACT

Immersion is defined as a method of foreign language instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of the language. The foreign language is the vehicle for content instruction; it is not the subject of instruction. Different questions pertaining to the following subjects are answered: (1) long-range goals of a program, (2) eventual effects on verbal and mathematical skills in English, (3) keys to successful programs, (4) advantages and disadvantages of total and partial immersion, (5) the best grade level to begin a program, (6) the commitment required for participants and their parents, (7) program staff, (8) materials used, (9) effect of immersion programs on existing foreign language programs, and (10) the number of students a school should plan for. (Contains 16 references.) (AB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Language and Linguistics

Digest

Foreign Language Immersion Programs

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Digest

November 1993

Foreign Language Immersion Programs

(EDO-FL-94-03)

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What Is a Foreign Language Immersion Program?

Immersion is defined as a method of foreign language instruction in which the regular school curriculum is taught through the medium of the language. The foreign language is the vehicle for content instruction; it is not the subject of instruction. Total immersion is one program format among several that range on a continuum in terms of time spent in the foreign language. In total immersion, all schooling in the initial years is conducted in the foreign language, including reading and language arts. Partial immersion differs from total in that 50% of the school day is conducted in English right from the start. In partial immersion, reading and language arts are always taught in English. Beyond that, the choice of subjects taught in each language is a local decision.

What Are the Goals of an Immersion Program?

The long-range goals of an immersion program include: 1) developing a high level of proficiency in the foreign language; 2) developing positive attitudes toward those who speak the foreign language and toward their culture(s); 3) developing English language skills commensurate with expectations for student's age and abilities; 4) gaining skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum in keeping with stated objectives in these areas.

In Total Immersion, When Is English Language Arts Introduced? How Much Instruction Is Given in English?

Different schools phase English in at different grade levels. The original total immersion model, pioneered in Canada, introduced English language arts in Grade 2 with the ultimate goal of instruction being a 50-50 balance of languages in the upper elementary grades. Some schools do not introduce English language arts until Grade 5, which seems to be a growing trend. Increasingly, experienced immersion educators are changing to an 80-20 ratio (foreign language to English) due to insignificant differences in English language achievement whether the amount of instruction given in English constitutes 50% or 20% of the day; in contrast, there is a significant difference in students' continued growth in the foreign language when the percentage of time spent in that language drops from 80% to 50%.

What Eventual Effect Do Immersion Programs Have on Verbal and Mathematical Skills in English?

Studies (Holobow et al., 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1991) have consistently shown that immersion students do as well as, and may even surpass, comparable non-immersion students on measures of verbal and mathematics skills.

What Are the Keys to Successful Immersion Programs?

Successful immersion programs are characterized by: (1) administrative support; (2) community and parental support; (3) qualified teachers; (4) appropriate materials in the foreign language; (5) time for teachers to prepare instructional materials in the language; (6) and ongoing staff development.

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Total and Partial Immersion?

Total immersion is the most effective way of developing foreign language proficiency. The intensity of the immersion experience coupled with the amount of exposure to the foreign language assures that students have the necessary language skills to deal with the curriculum in the upper elementary grades. Total immersion, however, is not for everyone. Not all parents or school personnel buy into the concept that students can learn just as much in a foreign language as in their own. Total immersion also requires a teacher for each immersion class. Not only are immersion teachers difficult to find, they may end up displacing staff because most elementary schools do not already have qualified immersion teachers on board.

In contrast, partial immersion needs fewer special teachers; one teacher can serve two immersion classes for one half day each. Partial immersion is easier to staff, and the potential effect on current staff is lessened. It is a more viable alternative for parents who feel uncomfortable with the idea of their children learning to read in a language other than English and seems to be more palatable to a wider range of parents and school personnel. Unfortunately, it is not nearly as effective as total immersion. Students do not develop the same level of foreign language proficiency as students in total immersion. A consequence of this is that students may have greater difficulty dealing with the school curriculum in subjects characterized by verbal abstractions.

In the long run, partial immersion does not produce better English language achievement than total immersion. However, the initial lag in English achievement associated with total immersion does not occur in partial immersion (Campbell et al., 1985).

At What Grade Level Is It Best to Begin an Immersion Program?

In the United States, most programs begin in prekindergarten, kindergarten, or Grade 1. Canadian educators report success with programs beginning with Grade 4 as well as in Grades 7-9. These programs, however, do not appear to serve the wide range of ability and achievement levels characteristic of pupils who enter immersion at the early grade levels.

What Kind of Commitment Should Be Required for Participants and Their Parents?

Many programs do not require a formal commitment from parents. Others ask parents to commit to keeping their child in the program for a minimum of six months or one year. Whether a formal commitment is required or not, extensive parent orientation prior to admitting students is important to ensure that parents and, where appropriate, students understand the nature of the program.

Periodically, opportunities should be provided to address parents' questions and concerns that arise once their child is actually in the program. Frequent and close communication between school and parents helps to maintain the commitment parents made when choosing the program for their child.

How Are Immersion Programs Staffed?

Immersion requires teachers who are elementary trained and experienced in the grade level to be taught, who have near native proficiency in the oral and written forms of the language, and who have a knowledge of the culture. If current staff members meet these criteria, they are ideal candidates for the program. Usually, however, schools find it necessary to employ new staff. Unless new students come into the school to justify additional positions, a new program may result in the displacement of some staff members.

It is not easy to find qualified immersion teachers, but it is also not impossible. Some school systems have been successful in recruiting teachers from abroad. Others are located in areas where elementary trained teachers who are fluent in the language may be residing in the local community. Advertisements may be placed in newspapers of major cities where potential candidates may be found. Substitutes and replacements are not often readily available, making it important to identify potential substitutes or replacements well before they are actually needed.

Existing staff does not need to be supplanted if additional students are recruited. If half day kindergarten classes are expanded to full day, then additional kindergarten teachers will be needed. Though this will not solve staff displacement problems in the ensuing grades, it is possible that they may be minimized through an increase in the student population or through natural staff attrition.

Where Can One Get Materials for Use in an Immersion Program?

French materials are available from both Canadian and European sources, as well as from a number of American publishers. Spanish materials may be acquired from publishing firms that offer Spanish versions of basal programs in reading/language arts, science, mathematics, and social studies. Two resources (Curtain, 1993 and Curtain & Pesola, 1994) contain appendices of materials.

Parent-teacher interest groups and immersion materials resource centers are quickly gaining momentum in the field. Interested educators and parents may develop contacts by writing: **Advocates for Language Learning**, P.O. Box 32083, Kansas City, MO 64111, an advocacy group for parents and educators interested in language learning. An $8.00 membership includes a quarterly newsletter and conference announcements. A $12.00 membership to **National Network for Early Language Learning**, Center for Applied Linguistics, 1118 22nd St. NW, Washington, DC 20037 includes a subscription to *FLES NEWS* and participation in special interest sessions at language conferences. An additional source of information is the **Canadian Association of Immersion Teachers**, 1815 Promenade Alta, Suite 101, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 3Y6 Canada.

What Probable Effect Will an Immersion Program have on an Existing Foreign Language Program?

Obviously, students in the immersion sequence are unlikely to profit from instruction in regular foreign language courses. Immersion students are fluent in the foreign language by Grade 2 or 3. Provision should be made for their continued growth in the foreign language in the later grades in the form of specially designed courses similar to the language arts courses students receive in English.

Non-immersion students may be motivated by the positive attitudes and the proficiency of immersion students. Learning a foreign language may be viewed as valuable by all students because of the immersion program's popularity and success.

How Many Students Should a School Plan for?

The number of students in a given class is determined by the pupil/teacher ratio. Class sizes in public school immersion programs generally range from 20-35. Obviously, small classes are desirable.

In the course of the years there will naturally be attrition. Often, students who leave the program are not replaced. Therefore, it is important to determine the desired size of the cohort at the end of the program sequence and then project backwards to determine the appropriate size of the cohort upon program entry. For example, a school that wants to maintain a class of 20 fifth graders may begin with 40 kindergartners or first graders.

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A series of videotapes on immersion teacher training is now available. For information, write Foreign Language Coordinator, Montgomery County Public Schools, 850 Hungerford Dr., Rockville, MD 20850.

This Digest is based on an article published in the September 1987 issue of *Foreign Language Annals* by Myriam Met titled "Twenty Questions: The Most Commonly Asked Questions About Starting a Foreign Language Immersion Program."

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